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FOR P. AGNEW, D. BENZE, A. MACDONALD

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TAGS: PTER PHUM PREL KPAO YM
SUBJECT: CLERICS AT PRESIDENTIAL MOSQUE, PRESIDENT'S NEPHEW
WARN AGAINST MILITARY INTERVENTION IN YEMEN

Classified By: Ambassador Stephen Seche for reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY. In a January 6 meeting with PolOff, clerics at Yemen's largest mosque voiced urgent concerns about any prospective US military intervention in Yemen. They also shifted blame for radicalizing young Muslims to other countries and complained of the lack of international attention for some of Yemen's key domestic challenges, namely the Houthi rebellion and the separatist Southern Movement. President Saleh's nephew Tariq Mohammed Saleh, vice-president of the mosque, stressed the importance of development assistance in helping Yemen defeat terrorism and welcomed initiatives to foster greater dialogue between Yemeni and US religious leaders. END SUMMARY.

DON'T TURN YEMEN INTO AFPAK

¶2. (C) Yemeni clerics based at Sana'a's Saleh Mosque, the nation's largest place of worship, warned PolOff on January 6 that direct US military action in Yemen against al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) would bring dire consequences. Dr. Abdulsalaam al-Majeedy, who leads Friday prayers at the Saleh Mosque on a rotating basis with several other imams, said, "I want the United States to take the message to (the January 28 London conference) that the world should not repeat the mistakes of Pakistan here in Yemen." He characterized the US military role in AfPak as having "increased the support of the people for al-Qaeda" and warned that the same thing would happen in Yemen if the US took direct military action on Yemeni soil.

A FOGGY DAY IN LONDONSTAN

¶3. (C) Hasan Abdullah al-Sheikh, the Ministry of Religious Endowments' senior agent for hajj and umrah, alleged that the West was more responsible for incubating radical Islamic ideas than Yemen, and claimed that would-be Northwest bomber Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab became radicalized in "Londonstan." "A lot of people get incorrect ideas in London, or Londonstan as they call it," he said. He also questioned the USG's focus on al-Qaeda, when there had been no US condemnation of the rebel Houthi group or the dissident Southern Movement. "People are wondering, is there some communication between the US and the Houthis or the Southern Movement? Why is the US only talking about al-Qaeda like it's dangerous?" Sheikh stated that "educated people" knew that the US was not supporting the Houthis or the Southern Movement but that the focus on al-Qaeda created that appearance "in some circles." He echoed Majeedy's warning against US military action in Yemen, saying that the 2002 US drone strike that killed al-Qaeda figure Abu Ali al-Harithi had sparked deep anger against the US among the Yemeni people and had led only to further violence inside Yemen and beyond.

PRESIDENTIAL MOSQUE: ALL IN THE FAMILY

¶4. (C) The extravagant and colossal Saleh Mosque, completed in 2008 at controversially exorbitant expense, is closely connected with President Saleh's inner circle. President Saleh worships there on Muslim holidays, and his son Ahmed Ali is the president of the mosque and the attached Islamic college. His nephew Tariq Mohammed, Presidential Guard commander, is vice-president of the mosque and told PolOff on January 6 that "the mosque is a place where all Yemenis and

all people of faith are welcome, it is not Shia or Sunni." He emphasized that the mosque teaches moderation and tolerance. As evidence of this, Dr. Majeedy described the January 1 sermon he delivered at the mosque in which he rejected the Fort Hood shootings as un-Islamic. Citing a story in which the Prophet Mohammed forbade a Muslim from fighting to defend the faith after taking an oath not to do so, Majeedy emphasized that Islam teaches its followers to observe their oaths, even those made to non-believers.

"Nidal Hassan did not follow the teachings of our religion," Majeedy said.

¶5. (C) Tariq Saleh concurred with the clerics' caution over direct US military action, stressing that "security cooperation is only 40 percent of the solution ... Economic and development assistance is more important." He expressed hope that there would be greater engagement between US and Yemeni clerics, lamenting the fact that currently only an International Visitor program exists "that helps five or six imams while we have thousands here who could benefit from these programs." He was receptive to developing more extensive programs promoting exchange between Yemeni and US imams, but advised that such programs be "coordinated with the Ministry of Religious Endowments, not with any random

private organizations that may have wrong ideas." Sheikh Khader Abdullah al-Wasabi, Administrative Director of Imams and Speakers at the Saleh Mosque, pledged to promote such programs and emphasized that the imams employed by the Ministry of Religious Endowments promote a message of tolerance and nonviolence.

¶6. (U) (ACTION NEA/PPD) Post will request approval for an IIP Speaker to team with Yemeni Interfaith Dialogue IVLP alumni in engaging local imams. Post will also request that ECA allot an additional 15 IVLP slots in FY2011 to facilitate broader Yemeni participation in Interfaith Dialogue single-country programs.

COMMENT

¶7. (C) The clerics at the Saleh Mosque -- Ministry of Religious Endowments employees who closely coordinate with and are supervised by President Saleh's family -- largely echoed what other high-level ROYG officials have said about the dangers of foreign military intervention in Yemen against AQAP. Yemeni officials are circling the rhetorical wagons to forestall the perceived possibility of foreign boots landing on Yemeni ground. END COMMENT.

SECHE